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ABSTRACT

Drawing from research on fear of failure and anecdotes from personal experience with the first women's expedition to ski to the South Pole, this discussion centers on how fear of failure affects women. Fear of failure leads to procrastination and performance well below one's ability. Women generally express more fear of failure than do men, partly because they fear the expected interpersonal consequences rather than the specific failure of performance. Individuals who exhibit strong fear of failure tend to be cooperative rather than competitive and socially rather than personally oriented; therefore, it is important to recognize relationship goals as well as physical goals. When women fail, they try to hide their failures; they should support each other and ask what was learned from the experience. A focus on learning goals rather than performance goals is a key to overcoming learned helplessness, an extreme fear of failure that keeps women from actualizing their potential. If girls fear failure early in life, they take fewer risks and do not gain the decision-making experience that develops judgment skills for making important decisions later in life. Experiential educators must encourage and support girls in risk taking, helping them to learn from mistakes and to separate physical risk from social risk. Five ways of doing this are presented,and nine mastery behaviors are listed that empower one to deal with failure and may actually increase self-esteem following failure. Contains 11 references. (TD)

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Facing Women's Fear of Failure: An AWEsome Experience

Anne Dal Vera

ED 412 052

We are the ones we have hoped for
We are the women who care
Now is the time to move closer
Separate we lose to despair

Margi Adam

Ann Bancroft pulled on her down coat, took a deep breath, and turned to face the AWE team. Her voice was taut with anger as she described our situation. "We need to use the energy of our sorrow and anger to focus on getting to the Pole. If we don't make it, we will have failed. Other expeditions have gotten this close to the South Pole and have had to turn back. In failing, we will have become severely financially burdened. I speak of 'we' including myself." The sorrow was deep. Ann was determined that the American Women's Trans-Antarctic Expedition (AWE) would be the first women's expedition to ski across the Antarctic continent.

Each of the four women on the expedition had a great desire to complete the traverse. I was burning with curiosity about the land beyond each day's horizon, fascinated with the patterns of waves carved in the snow by the wind. We were 67 miles from the South Pole, moving slowly due to illness and injury. With food for six days left, we had to keep up a steady pace of over 11 miles per day.

I enjoyed Ann's passionate outcry of anger. She always seemed so strong and sure. This was one of the few moments when I felt I knew what she was really feeling. I was confident that we could continue at our established pace of 12 to 14 miles a day. Still, I thrilled to hear Ann's urgent call for each of us to maintain our mental

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focus on the goal and continue to strive to reach it. Sunniva Sorby responded defensively, "I know you don't believe me, but I am doing the best I can." Sunniva had been struggling with bronchitis for several days, breathing through a cold, damp, neoprene face mask and skiing at a pace that wouldn't force her lungs to develop life-threatening pneumonia.

Sue Giller seemed confused, asking me later if Ann was mad at her for getting too far ahead of Sunniva. Sue's endurance had improved over the 62 days of this expedition until she was zooming ahead, intent on making it to the South Pole.

At the next break, two hours later, Ann apologized for her previous talk. She had meant to be more positive and not give us a downer. She had let her fear of failure, anger, and sorrow about canceling the effort of the ski traverse bring her down. She said that we had done well, in comparison to a previous ski traverse of Antarctica. The men took fewer hours to ski the miles, but we were making significant progress. We hadn't made up the eight-day delay we suffered waiting for plane repairs and the weather to clear before we flew to the start of the journey. We could make the Pole if we focused on that as our goal and worked toward it.

AWE was four-and-a-half years in the planning. The team, lead by Ann Bancroft, age 37, the first woman to cross the ice to the North Pole was supported by the work of hundreds of volunteers. Sue Giller, age 45, expedition navigator and equipment specialist, had spent the previous 20 years mountaineering in the world's highest peaks. I, Anne Dal Vera, age 39, had taught cross-country skiing and guided trips in wilderness year-round for 14 years. I planned, procured, and packed the food for the expedition. Sunniva Sorby, age 31, was in charge of medical supplies and coordinated the research on the expedition.

The team flew from Punta Arenas, Chile, to Patriot Hills in Antarctica, on November 8, 1992. We continued on a short flight to the edge of the continent near Hercules Inlet on November 9. After a very windy introduction to our new "home," we began pulling our seven-foot sleds filled with 185 pounds of food and equipment to the South Pole. Within the first few days, we settled into a routine of sled pulling, cooking, eating, completing the research, and generally taking care of the necessities of life to stay healthy and pull as efficiently as possible. After a month of travel, we were met by plane for a resupply of food and fuel. We arrived at the South Pole on January 14, 1993, after traveling 678 miles. Our original objective of traversing the continent of Antarctica was out of reach, as we would have to travel the remaining 870 miles in 32 days to meet the only cruise ship available to take us off the continent. We succeeded in being the first all-women's expedition to ski to the South Pole, while Ann Bancroft was the first woman to cross the ice to both the North and South Poles. We had failed, however, to cross the continent.

In experiential education, as well as in the society as a whole, success and achievement are highly valued. Challenges are part of experiential education. And sometimes, students fail. The fear of failure is often a barrier for women. The goal of this chapter is to show, through stories of AWE, other accounts of women's outdoor

trips, and the research on fear of failure, how fear affects women. How experiential educators can teach about risk and failure in ways that effectively recognize the fear that women and girls have about risking connection and relationship is also examined. A mastery orientation to life's challenges is described and resources available to the educator are noted.

> Fear of failure is an internal experience related to achievement. It is not necessarily related to external, objective measures of success or failure. . . . "Failure" is the experience of falling short, whether or not one actually does so. It is the discrepancy between a self-set expectation or standard and the self-perceived accomplishment. (Yuen & Depper, 1988, pp. 22-23)

Dr. Esther D. Rothblum, at the University of Vermont, has extensively studied women's fear of failure in academia. She has shown that fear of failure leads to procrastination and performance well below the ability of a student. In extreme cases, it can lead to learned helplessness and a paralysis in the face of challenges. Rothblum, Morris, and Weinstock (1995) state, "Although many individuals strive for success, others behave in ways that reduce the risk of failure, even at the cost of success."

Photo courtesy of Woodswomen

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Women often question the value of striving for success when a relationship will suffer. In the conclusion of her review of literature in "Fear of Failure," Rothblum (1990) says:

> Women generally report more fear of failure, and behave in ways that express more fear of failure, than do men. What is fearful about failure seems to be the expected interpersonal consequences (such as fear of rejection) rather than the specific academic performance. . . . Much of the research reviewed suggests that, in many ways, individuals who score high on fear of failure are cooperative rather than competitive, and socially rather than personally oriented. . . . Perhaps a more important question is whether high striving for success is a desirable goal. (pp. 530-531)

On all-women outdoor trips and expeditions, communication of individual needs and expectations can set the scene for teamwork and cooperative action which allows a group to achieve several goals.

On a Woodswomen leadership course in Colorado, I took part in a discussion among a group of women who were setting out to climb a nearby peak. Denise Mitten, executive director of Woodswomen, asked the skiers to explain what they wanted to get out of the day. After everyone had spoken, she asked the question two more times, phrasing it differently each time, explaining that it was important to her that each person be as clear as possible about her goals. Some of the women realized that although they had a strong desire to reach the summit, on that particular day it was as important to participate in the camaraderie of the group of women and to enjoy the view high above the valley. Later when we reached a high spot, the weather was quite good and although the goals of camaraderie and a good view had been met, there was time to reach the summit as well. That became an added bonus. Decisions were clearer on the mountain and each woman knew what she wanted because we had taken time earlier to look within and see the many possible outcomes for the day. Relationship goals were recognized as being as important as physical goals. The group experienced the process of climbing the peak as rewarding as reaching the summit. This episode also gave these future leaders the skills to facilitate communication and goal setting on subsequent outdoor trips.

When we pay attention to the diverse needs and desires of women, we bring a richness to life. As Rothblum (1990) noted:

> Hoffman has argued that a mentally healthy society needs to emphasize greater flexibility, and the more diffuse achievement patterns of women should serve as a model for a fuller life. Developing affiliative and social skills is preferable to encouraging competitive striving for goals that can be won by, at most, a few individuals. (p. 531)

The AWE team spent four-and-a-half years planning and preparing for the traverse of Antarctica. During that time, the mission and goals of the organization

reflected the diverse vision of Ann Bancroft, the team leader. The goals mirrored Ann's commitment to education and a positive impact on her community. Ann stated these goals in the *AWE Fact Sheet*:

Expedition Mission and Goals:

- Focus attention on the existing and potential achievements of women while encouraging people of all ages to take on new challenges.
- Make history as the first all-women's team to traverse Antarctica without dogs or motorized vehicles; and provide Ann Bancroft an opportunity to be the first woman to cross the ice to both the North and South Poles.
- Stretch the physical and emotional limits of team members.
- Promote awareness of the environmental issues facing Antarctica and their global impact.
- Provide a hands-on vehicle for bringing Antarctica, as well as the past and present achievements of women into the classroom.
- Conduct physiological/psychological research pertaining to women under extreme conditions. (AWE Foundation, 1990)

The goal of traversing Antarctica was the most visible and tangible goal of the AWE team. As we approached the South Pole and time was running out, we were faced with the reality of a strict deadline. We had to reach McMurdo Sound by February 17 to meet the only cruise ship available to take us to New Zealand. Eight hundred seventy miles of ice, including the heavily crevassed Beardmore Glacier, wider than the longest glacier in Switzerland, lay between the South Pole and McMurdo Sound. With our efficient UpSki wind canopies, we would need at least 40 days of hard travel to complete the traverse. If we attempted the crossing and missed the ship, our only way off the continent would be an air-pickup by Adventure Network at an estimated additional cost of $350,000 and physical risk to us and the pilots involved.

January 5, 1993, found us 119 miles from the Pole, having spent several days weaving around and over 3- to 6-foot-high sastrugi (waves of snow and ice, packed hard by the wind). That evening, all four of us, crowded into one small tent, assessed our individual conditions, and discussed our strategy.

Amid tears, Sunniva admitted that her sprained ankle and bronchitis meant that in spite of her great desire to do the traverse, it wouldn't be responsible to continue beyond the Pole. Sue was confident that she could endure the emotional hardship involved in the hard push necessary to complete the traverse. She also felt some fear that she would continue to lose weight after the pole and become too physically weak to complete the slog through the deep snow anticipated on the Ross Ice Shelf. We all agreed that Ann Bancroft was the strongest of our group, both physically and mentally. She had gotten stronger throughout the expedition.

Ann and Sue both expressed concern that I would have a great deal of difficulty with the emotional strain of pushing as hard as would be necessary to reach McMurdo Sound by February 17. Emotional outbursts I'd had during a very painful struggle with tendonitis caused them to believe I didn't have an emotional reserve or the ability to shut down to pain. I listened to their comments and said I would give a reply the next day. We concluded the meeting by adjusting our goal to reach the South Pole as a team of four. We planned to ski as hard as possible to try to reserve the possibility of a traverse for two team members. Still, we knew that time was running out.

Exhausted, I crawled into my sleeping bag to sleep on the information. I wanted to work toward the success of the AWE team as a whole and complete the traverse. But I did not want to become an unfeeling automaton (nor could I do so). I also knew deep within me that to accomplish the traverse, the team would have to trust each other implicitly. Travel would be through crevasse fields, where a misstep could plunge a skier deep into an abyss. The other team members would have to be able to rescue the fallen skier. It was no place to doubt the competence of a partner. The next day, I told the others that I would not go on beyond the Pole with them. I cried in anger and frustration with the loss of a big dream.

As I dealt with my sense of failure in not completing the traverse of Antarctica, I grieved the loss of an opportunity to see an incredible part of the world, and the loss of time to enjoy a lifestyle and activity that I treasure. I went through several stages of grieving, much like a person who has lost a loved one.

During the next few days, I went through disbelief to sadness to despair, anger, doubt, loneliness, fear, and a deep connection with the ice and snow over which we traveled. I felt very fortunate that I had the time to deal with all these strong emotions while we were still on the ice. Perhaps that slowed us down at times, while I worked through some of the strongest feelings I'd had since adolescence. I wanted desperately to preserve the slim chance that Sue and Ann had of doing the traverse, and I skied hard, thinking of how my going out could possibly help in fund-raising efforts at home. Still, I felt isolated as I dealt with my fear of how my failure would be seen by others; the media, corporate sponsors, our individual supporters, my family and friends. We pushed hard, pulling sleds ten hours each day, with time only for cooking, eating, and sleep. Communication served to get the daily tasks done. We were operating on survival mode. No time or energy existed to process emotions as we each dealt with our feelings of approaching failure or partial success.

Ann Bancroft, as expedition leader, felt the heavy weight of the decision to end the traverse at the South Pole. She described her experience in an interview:

> In making the decision, I looked at the facts, I looked at the situation, . . . I looked at all the scribbles that I had taken on the backside of my journal: the logistics of a group of three, two, and even a solo option. I looked at all of our options over and over and over again: the miles, the time frame, the money angle, the legacy, all the different aspects to the decision, and it just

> kept coming out the same one. I have physically never been in better shape. Never have I been more emotionally ready to take on something in my life. And at that moment I had to separate, and that was very frustrating and very difficult. It has been a long process for me to come to grips with not being able to finish what I set out to do and feel triumphant about what we have achieved. (Rothblum, in press)

On January 14, 1993, the four women of AWE skied the last 12.2 miles to the South Pole. Ann Bancroft became the first woman to cross the ice to both the North and South Poles. We were there—all four of us. And we were still friends. While we didn't list that as one of our goals in our expedition literature, it was important to each of us that we work together as a cohesive unit as we "stretched the physical and emotional limits of team members" (AWE Foundation, 1990, p. 1). We decided to end the expedition at the South Pole. That decision was hard for each of us. It required a great deal of soul searching and self-assessment

Through the AWE expedition, I pushed my limits and lived a very passionate existence. The failure to traverse the continent taught me many lessons: 1) Part of the experience of failure is to grieve the loss of an expectation of oneself. 2) When women fail to reach an objective, we tend to hide from each other, not believing in the power of sharing that experience or the rewards of accomplishing the goals we *have* achieved. 3) When failure occurs, we readjust the goals and go on with life. New goals develop consistent with the values that each of us holds deep within ourselves. 4) I must continue to believe in myself and to know that I am doing what I can to meet my expectations in light of the adjusted goals.

At the South Pole, the AWE team became individualistic, each woman dealing with the impact of suddenly being surrounded by the noise and bustle of a small city, the Amundsen-Scott South Pole Scientific Research Station. I withdrew from the others, not discussing our failure or the goals we had achieved. We had spoken earlier of the hope that our decision could be used by school children to learn about having to make hard decisions about turning back if the risk becomes too great. In their conclusion, Kahn and Leon (1994) described our coping:

> A significant issue with which the group had to deal was the decision to terminate the expedition at the South Pole. . . . The interview data confirmed the quantitative information about the high level of functioning of this group. While all were disappointed, the group abided by the ultimate decision made at the South Pole and did not splinter between those who felt physically capable to proceed further, and those who did not. (p. 695)

Whether women dare to present a new concept at a manager's meeting of a Fortune 500 corporation or climb a peak in difficult weather, the risk of failure is present and real. Studies have shown that if women fail, we may try to hide our failures, choosing to believe that women need to see successful role models, not evidence that we can fail. Men often wear their failures as badges of courage to show that they

have taken chances. As women, we can give each other significant support by staying near each other and asking what we learned from the experience. We can get beyond our fear of failure and loss of self esteem (Duff, 1993).

Martha McPheeters, a senior staff member at Voyageur Outward Bound School in northern Minnesota, models a learning approach to life as she asks people for constant feedback about her work. She takes many risks and doesn't always succeed, but she loves a life of learning. After being fired from an outdoor adventure program in 1989, Martha requested a meeting with the director to discuss her performance and where she needed to improve. She selected information from that interview to determine what she felt she wanted to develop because she believed in her style and wanted to continue to grow. While it was painful to be fired, Martha chose to make the most of the opportunity to learn from others' experience of her work.

This focus on setting learning goals rather than performance goals is a key to overcoming learned helplessness, an extreme fear of failure that keeps women from actualizing their potential and enjoying life. Marone (1992) describes a woman who developed a "mastery orientation" to life: When Sue Ann's husband hit her after years of verbal and emotional abuse, she started working on a plan to get out. She knew she needed money to survive on her own. Carl wouldn't let her work, so she found ways to squirrel away money, saving from grocery shopping, cutting out lunch, and bumming rides with friends to save gas money. Her friends and family helped by giving her cheap presents she could show her husband and giving her the rest in secret cash. When Carl came home drunk on Fridays and passed out on the couch, she took the opportunity to steal five dollars from his pocket, knowing that he would not remember how much money he had. After two years, during which Carl became more violent and unpredictable, she had saved a little over $700. Following a careful plan, Sue Ann left the house when Carl passed out, slashing his tires so he couldn't follow her. He had threatened to kill her if she left him, so she knew she had to leave town. She rented a studio apartment in a town across the state line, and got two jobs. Through Sue Ann's strategic planning and taking action, she escaped a dangerous situation and created a new life.

Most of the time, we don't develop a mastery orientation to life until we are forced to do so. The skills necessary for taking charge of one's life can also be taught and practiced. I also find it helpful to visualize myself adopting the behaviors of a mastery-oriented individual:

- Offering no explanations for failure nor giving external attributions.
- Refusing to internalize setbacks as personal attributes.
- Keeping failure to a specific area.
- Focusing on the future and seeking solutions in the present.
- Attributing success to internal factors such as effort and ability.
- Striving for success by setting learning goals.
- Being unconcerned with the performance of peers.

- Refusing to compare herself with others.
- Indulging in positive self-talk.

(Marone, 1992)

Developing mastery behaviors empowers us to deal with failure and prevent the devastation that frequently follows failure. At one point in my career, I received a critical evaluation of my performance on an outdoor leadership course. Knowing that the evaluation held the key to future employment, I was devastated. I indulged in negative self-talk and globalized the failure from a few comments into a belief about myself. I spent the evening walking and crying, feeling that I could "never be good enough." The next day, I was told that I would be hired and that the instructors merely wanted me to realize very clearly where I had room for improvement. I could have saved myself the anguish had I learned earlier to look at criticism and failure as an opportunity for growth.

Scientific literature suggests that women and men have been socialized to respond differently in dealing with failure. As noted by Rothblum (1990): "During the early school years, females achieve well in the academic arena. Even by first grade, however, boys prefer repeating previously failed tasks, whereas girls prefer repeating tasks on which they have been successful" (pp. 507-508).

If girls fear failure early in life, they take fewer risks and do not gain the experience of decision making that leads to development of judgment so essential for making important decisions later in life. As experiential educators, we must encourage and support girls in their risk taking, helping them to learn from mistakes and separating the physical risk from social risk. We can create experiences where women consistently support one another through failure, focusing on the benefits of risk taking. We can lessen women's fear of failure.

After the AWE team returned home to a wonderful reception and were able to deal with the media's reaction, which was mostly positive, we began to enjoy the recognition we received. Most were supportive of our decision to stop at the Pole. When failure occurs, we readjust the goals and go on with life. New goals develop consistent with the values that each of us holds deep within ourselves. It is important to feel that I have chosen to deal with the consequences of taking risks, to accept rewards and responsibility. I must continue to believe in myself and to know that I am doing what I can to meet my own expectations.

As I look at these lessons about failure, I ask, "How can we teach the lessons of failure experientially?" It is essential in a world that is constantly changing to be able to deal with the reality that with risk comes the possibility of failure. People must risk as society grows technically and socially. The experience of taking risks and dealing with the consequences of success, failure, and partial success leads to confidence in situations that demand we transcend our limits. As experiential educators, we can teach girls and women about risk and failure in the following ways:

1. Acknowledge up-front that risk involves the possibility of failure.
2. When a woman fails, do not allow her to isolate herself, or others to abandon her. Use the occasion for all to learn from the situation.
3. Encourage learning goals rather than performance goals.
4. When students show risk-avoidance behavior, let them know that their peers also feel those same fears, that their concerns for the well-being of others do not negate their own need to achieve.
5. If a group or an individual fails:
   a. Grieve about the loss of opportunity.
   b. Celebrate achievements!
   c. Learn what skills or knowledge must be gained to succeed in the future.
   d. Adjust goals if necessary, consistent with the values of the individual or members of the group.
   e. Act toward those goals.

In *Women as Pioneers and Risktakers* (Tiernan & Sorenson, 1992), the lesson plans take students through a step-by-step process of team building. Students learn about risk taking, sharing leadership, persevering through difficulties and successes, and seeing old problems in new ways. They share their narratives of success and failure with others and learn from their failure. This curriculum can be adapted for use for 4th grade through college level. Although it is written for indoor classroom use, it could be adapted for outdoor adventure situations as well. Many resources are cited to bring the experience of a culturally diverse history of women into the lessons as well.

Compassionate and caring instructors occasionally encounter students' fears of failure. Golden (1988), a professor in the Department of Psychology at Ithaca College, described her response to women who talk about their fear of failure:

> While I react to each student on an individual basis, there is a general rule I apply when a student presents or manifests fear of failure concerns. Whether it be a reluctance to speak out in class, imposter feelings, or a fear of disappointing some significant other, I share with students my observation of how the same fears exist among their female peers. I want them to know that they are not alone in feeling the way they do, that gender based socialization contributes to their common experience, and in the case of fear of failure in meeting the needs of others, that it is critical to include their own needs among those requiring attention. (pp. 46-47)

As the AWE team flew away from Antarctica, I reflected in my journal:

> Antarctica is a place of my dreams for such a long time now. This has been the experience of a lifetime! I have given all to this venture. I have learned a great deal. I know what it means to push hard day after day and be so tired that I think I can't do it any more. And then to get up and do it anyway. I

> know what it is to be lonely and to cry from that and physical weariness. I know what it is to take the risk to be open about my weaknesses. To accept them. And to work with them.
>
> At times I felt bigger than I am—closer to being something I've sensed I might be capable of, but never had the courage to seriously imagine. And those were times born not of great physical achievement but times when I had energy for work, for humor and for love. It may seem odd to speak of love now, but my best work comes from feeling confident that I can give of myself in all ways.

The AWE expedition was a significant part of the risk taking of my life. As I continue to learn and grow, I am more and more excited by the opportunities that life offers us.

As more women risk to accomplish goals not previously attained by women, gender roles become less strictly defined. Women and men find value and satisfaction in pursuing adventure *and* using healthy social skills. As experiential educators, we can encourage students to take risks. If they fail, we can encourage them to discuss their failure with others and add new skills and knowledge to their repertoire. We can encourage groups to stand in solidarity, forging meaningful bonds. We can help them increase self-esteem *because* they have "failed."

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